

Some Thoughts on English Pronunciation: Speculations on the Possible Effects of Explicit Grammar Learning on Pronunciation

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1. Introduction

As the notion of the Communicative Approach sweeps through the EFL/ESL scene, the component of pronunciation teaching has been making a significant shift from a segmental to a suprasegmental orientation (Wong, 1985; Morley, 1987; Pennington, 1988). In other words, rhythm, stress and intonation rather than individual sounds have been gaining more and more attention than ever before, influencing the methods and techniques used in the classroom. As a result, it seems that the overall performance of Japanese students has shown some improvements compared with what used to be observed in the past. However, a close scrutiny will reveal that their utterances still present some peculiarly Japanese qualities and do not fully reflect the intended meaning or emotions. Is it solely because of the infamous L1 interference? Or are there any other significant factors affecting speech performance? The aim of this study is to seek a correlation between one of a myriad of probable factors involved in English mispronunciation by Japanese and consistency of learner errors.

2. The English Pronunciation Difficulties of Japanese Learners

The problems shared by the majority of Japanese learners could be classified into several categories. The first is in the realm of segmentals, for example:

- substitution of vowels (/ɑ/ /u/ /ʌ/ /æ/ /ɛ/ /ɔ/ /ə/)
- tongue position of (l)
- /l/ and /r/ distinction
- /f/ /v/ /s/ /θ/ /m/ /n/
- consonant cluster
- semi-vowels (ear vs. year)

The second category is in the realm of suprasegmentals, for example:

- stress (including sentence stress)
- aspiration

- assimilation
- intonation
- rhythm
- sound changes across word boundaries
- elision

Among these, concern over the suprasegmentals appears to be trendy, but contrary to popular belief, there has always been substantial interest in this particular area.

As Daniel Jones (1918) stated, “[t]he greatest difficulty of all is experienced by the Japanese,” despite the long-existent and now growing interest in suprasegmentals, teachers confront essentially the same problems now as ten years ago. It is worth special mention that nearly a hundred years ago, Harold E. Palmer already called attention to a peculiarly Japanese phonological feature that might result in unintelligibility. Here is his own handwriting in a letter addressed to Iwao Kuroda:

I noticed particularly your so that. Your that was fully articulated, and there was even a slight pause after it. Like this: ["sou ʒæt ʒə tʃai'ni:z...."], instead of ["souʒtʒə tʃai'ni:z]. This was over-articulating almost to the point of unintelligibility.

Please excuse these criticisms of a pronunciation-
enunciation that is otherwise perfect.

Yours sincerely,
Harold E. Palmer.

(1959)

Why is this “Japaneseness” so persistent? A large part of it could be explained with recourse to L1 interference. However, through years of teaching experience, the present authors have come away with an impression that the words or phrases or even grammatical items that are familiar to the students, seem to receive undue attention, consciously or unconsciously, and thus display a certain amount of awkwardness in speech.

3. Investigation

In order for an effective study to maintain a decent level of objectivity, state-of-the-art devices such as a speech analyzer are needed. To begin, however, it was decided that a sampling probe would be necessary to see whether there is any such tendency at all. For this preliminary study, 71 students at a certain women’s college in Hiroshima city were requested to read some dialogues each containing familiar phrases or structures shown in the appendix, and record them on the tape recorder. Self-monitoring of the recorded dialogues and a questionnaire followed these. In the self-monitoring the students were asked to listen for mainly

suprasegmental errors they made, and were encouraged to put on the questionnaire what they thought had caused those errors. Our hope is that the conclusions here may provide a clue for anyone in the teaching service to unravel the Gordian Knot of English pronunciation teaching and learning.

4. Results

There appears to be a connection between certain suprasegmental pronunciation features and the explicitly taught rules of English grammar. This is quite apparent in the misplacement of stress which is given on normally unstressed words. Often is the time when these words fall into the category of “function words,” as compared to “content words.” Following are the results of how some of the words tested received excessive prominence:

Misplacement of stress

Dialogue 1 “it”	41.8% of the subjects perceived themselves as having	overstressed
2 “so that”	56.4%	
3 “been”	69.1%	
4 “been”	54.5%	
*5 “had”	49.1% <i>understressed</i>	
6 “whose”	54.5%	
7 “which”	74.5%	
8 “as”	47.3%	
9 “been”	67.3%	
10 “have”	34.5%	
11 “it”	38.2%	
12 “been”	52.7%	

As can be seen, for all of these items, nearly half or more of the students (sometimes even over 70%) admitted that they have problems with stress.

The results of the questionnaire show that 57.7% of all the students asked, said that these problems are partly attributable to obsession with explicitly highlighted or inculcated items taught at junior/senior high schools.

It is curious to note that in dialogue 5, a causative verb “had” is unstressed, even though it ought to be given an abundant force. This could be paradoxical evidence of phonetic imprinting on account of classroom teaching. There is a strange phenomenon of both teachers and learners being gravitated toward stressing the pronoun subject and putting the following verb in the valley of rhythm at the time of chorus reading. The “had” in question was trapped in this unique “Japan Trench.” A possible explanation to this is that because of the identical appearance of the ordinary possessive use of the verb “had”, the learners probably do not make a

conscious phonological distinction despite the obvious grammatical difference. Hence the identical phonological outcome.

5. Conclusion

Of course we have the inherently Japanese stress patterns, which are a product of the syllable-timed, pitch-accent quality of the Japanese language. In addition to this, the knowledge cramming orientation in grammar teaching, detached from sounds could be another factor that causes the above-mentioned errors in pronunciation. Considering the significance of the roles which suprasegmentals play in communication, this lack of effective phonetic realization may pose a tremendous challenge for the teaching of effective communication.

Also, as far as the present study is concerned, the influence of grammar teaching/study and how it can operate in insidious ways, has been brought to light. To counteract the imbalance which is reflected in the students' errors, pronunciation training must occur alongside traditional grammar training. What this means is that the teaching and learning of grammar is all the more important, but should be treated in a special way, specifically fused with substantial pronunciation teaching and learning.

Finally, although this study is obviously not conclusive, we have shown that indeed there is some substantial effect of grammar learning on phonological features. At least one thing is clear from all this, that is, we can surely no longer afford to ignore this problem and sweep it under the rug.

Appendix 1

[In the original form used in the experiment, the words at issue were not underlined.]

1. A: How did you do in the big race Saturday?
B: I'd rather not talk about it.
A: What happened?
B: Well, I was leading until someone crashed into me and I fell off my bike. After that I found it impossible to win the championship.
2. A: Hello.
B: Hi, Bill.
A: Oh, hi, Bob.
B: Say, did you know that it's Mary's birthday on Monday?
A: Yes, I know. Are we going to get her a gift?
B: Yes, we are. That's why I'm calling. I'm collecting five dollars from everyone.
A: Oh, fine. I'll be happy to give that.
B: I want to collect the money tomorrow so that I can buy the gift this weekend.
3. A: Where's Jane? I haven't seen her lately.
B: Oh, didn't you hear?
A: No.
B: She's been sick since last Friday.
4. A: What time does the movie start?
B: At seven o'clock. Where is Tina?
A: She's still sleeping.
B: Still sleeping? She's been sleeping for ten hours now. Let's wake her up.
5. A: Do you have the picture?
B: Yeah.
A: What happened? Did he decide to have your brother take a picture of your dog?
B: No, he had my brother take a picture of me.
6. A: What do you call a child whose parents are dead?
B: I don't know. A foster child?
A: No, a child whose parents are dead is called an orphan.
7. A: Do you know a lot about animals?
B: Yeah. Why?
A: Well, what do you call this animal here and where does it come from?
B: This is a koala which comes from Australia.

8. A: Is the work done?
B: I think so.
A: Do you need any more help?
B: No. You might as well go home now.
9. A: What's his name?
B: It's Ethelbert.
A: That's an unusual name. Who's he named after?
B: I think he must have been named after his grandfather.
10. A: Where's that girl you mentioned?
B: She left.
A: Did you talk to her?
B: No, I didn't.
A: Well, you should have introduced yourself to her.
11. A: You really look tired.
B: Yes, I am.
A: Is your job still so different and demanding?
B: Yes, it is. I tell you, if it weren't for the weekends, I'd go insane.
12. A: Are you okay?
B: Yes, fine, thanks.
A: And your car, is it running okay?
B: Yes, just fine. And thanks again. If it hadn't been for your kindness, I'd still be stuck back there.

Appendix 2

A

- ・リズムがなく、棒読みみたいだった。
- ・発音に自信がないところがあり、文末になると息が弱くなっていた。
- ・接続詞を強く読んでいた。
- ・so that ~ can や might do well などは高校のとき、テストに出題されていて、穴埋め問題としてよく出たので、ついつい強く読んでしまっているような気がする。

Japanese Student A



I found it impossible to win the championship.

American Speaker



I found it impossible to win the championship.

B

- ・been と、思いつき「びーん」とのばして発音している。
おろろ、ジャバニス-イングリッシュである。(音としていいのだから、当り前のことであるが。)
- ・前置詞をこれほど思いつき強く、はっきり発音しまくっている。
例は it, for がそうである。なぜ、このような行為をするのか。これは、中学、高校での筆記テストのカッコウめのためであるように思われる。前置詞が大切であると入試のための勉強では教えられたからであろう。

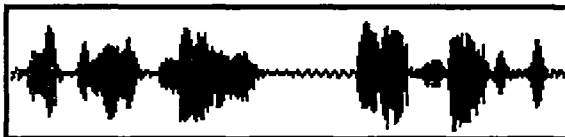
・構文 (10b. 兎... ジェネー... やつ) を. これもまた強く.
 それだけがあるで別の生き物であるかの様に. (個別) と個別に
 発音している. これも. 構文 (例えば 8 の *might as well*, 9 の
must have been) が大切に教え込まれたからにはある...
 さらに. 自分が覚えた. 打て覚えていた構文が. その文中に出ると
 うれしくてつい個別に発音してしまう. カンジンの大切単語は.
 無関心に弱く発音してしまうのに.
 ・6 の *where* も全く. 上記のとおりである.

Japanese Student B



I want to collect the money tomorrow so that I can buy the gift this weekend.

American Speaker



I want to collect the money tomorrow so that I can buy the gift this weekend.

C

・英語の行いとかは. 学校の先生が強調してあげて強く
 発音してあげた. 私もそれに覚えたりして. 強く強くと
 して覚えたので. それが. 頭に残っている.

そして. 10と21で. 読みやす. 簡単な単語とかは. 10と21
 発音して長々で. 読みにくく単語は. 10と21と3と
 とがある.

・ *have been* が. あるから. 過去分詞とか. *should have*
 でどうだという文法的に覚え方をしたからだと思う.

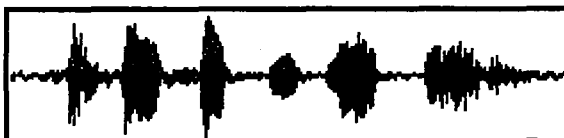
・ 頭では. どのも弱く. どのも強く. 3つの. 今では. 7と17と
 10と11と12と. 10と11と12と. どうしても. 読みは. 10と11と
 くせが出ている.

Japanese Student C



She's been sick since last Fri- day.

American Speaker



She's been sick since last Fri- day.

D

意味を把握し得るから読んではいけない
 大分ほど 一着... 言葉...
 強調したから読んではいけない。

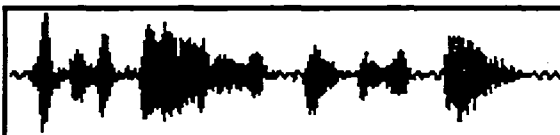
意味を... 読んではいけない... 文...
 それ以外の... 読んではいけない...
 読んではいけない... since, so that, whose, which
 文法。教科書に必ず入るから...
 自信を持って... 読んではいけない...
 読んではいけない...
 今... 学校... 読んではいけない...
 用... 読んではいけない... 読んではいけない...
 形式... 読んではいけない...
 ...に重点をおいて... 読んではいけない...

Japanese Student D



This is a koa- la which comes f- ro- m Australia.

American Speaker



This is a ko-a-la which comes from Aus- tralia.

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